THE RECORDS MANAGEMENT AUDIT/EVALUATION GUIDE

The Records Management Branch
Supply Management
Alberta Public Works, Supply and Services
10442 - 169 Street, Edmonton, Alberta T5P 3X6

(403) 483 - 4012

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CHAPTER ONE: RECORDS MANAGEMENT AND ITS ENVIRONMENT

When undertaking the evaluation of a records system, it is necessary to keep in mind the reasons for records management. The reason for recording information in the first place is to be able to retrieve it. But the reason for formally managing the whole process is to save money. There are two other reasons for a records management program: the preservation of historically important records and the security of information. A successful records management program depends upon the effectiveness of the systems that make up the overall function, such as those controlling the creation of information, its flow and use, and eventually its disposal.

Records management, like any other complex, centralized program, must be audited from time to time to ensure that it is achieving its objectives. The purpose of this guide is to provide a basis upon which to audit records management practices in the Government of Alberta. It will also serve departments as an evaluation standard by which they may assess the overall efficiency of their own programs and systems, and their adherence to the stipulations of the Government of Alberta Records Management Policy (PWSS 104). Contact the Records Management Branch or the Provincial Archives for any clarification you may need in their respective areas.

The records management policy describes the functions and responsibilities of various Government bodies in the control of public records. Adherence to policy is monitored by the Records Management Branch in conjunction with the Provincial Archives. Records management effectiveness is audited by the Records Management Branch on behalf of the Public Records Committee.

Using this guide, public records officers will be able to prepare their self-evaluation plans with the confidence that no major factors have been overlooked. The guide is structured so that the auditor, and the self-evaluator, are always oriented within the total function.

CHAPTER TWO: THE COMPONENTS OF A RECORDS MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

PREREQUISITES

1. Authority
2. Space
3. Equipment
4. Staff

PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

1. Cost reduction
2. Efficient retrieval
3. Archival preservation
4. Information security

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

All identifiable factors in information management contribute in some way to all the objectives of records management; however, this is where they do so most prominently.

1. Cost Reduction

   Competent staff
   Efficient procedures
   System design
   Type of equipment
   Use of space
   Controlled creation of information
   Disaster planning
   Prompt disposal
   Efficient distribution of information

2. Efficient Retrieval

   Competent staff
   Efficient procedures
   System design
   System maintenance
   Automation
   Classification
   Indexing
   Scheduling

3. Archival Preservation

   Maintenance
   Scheduling
   Disposition
   Disaster planning

4. Information Security

   Maintenance
   Storage
   Disposition
   Disaster planning

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE PROGRAM MANAGER

1. Planning: equipment, space, system design, automation, disaster

2. Managing: staffing, training, procedures, special record categories, monitoring and evaluation, central agency liaison

SYSTEM FUNCTIONS GROUPED FOR AUDIT/EVALUATION

1. Program Management

   Authority
   Selection of equipment
   Design of system
   Establishment of standards
   Implementation of procedures
   Training
   Staffing
   Special records categories
   Disaster planning
   Central agency liaison
   Evaluation

2. Creation/Distribution

   Mail
   Forms
   Directives
   Correspondence

3. Retrieval/Maintenance

   Filing
   Classification
   Indexing
   File Control
   Security

4. Storage

   Active records
   Inactive records
   Offsite storage

5. Scheduling/Disposition

   Scheduling
   Disposition

A SUMMARY OF FUNCTIONS

1. PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

Authority

The support of senior management is required along with the cooperation of users for an effective records management program.

Selection of Equipment

The aim is to select the appropriate type of equipment while making maximum use of space.

Design of the System

The Block Numeric System is the standard in the Government of Alberta. Administrative records should be standardized; operational records should use some adaptation of the Block Numeric System.

Establishing Standards

Conforming to general records management principles and central agency directives, the public records officer establishes practices and procedures for functions within the departmental program.

Implementation of Procedures

Consistent performance cannot be achieved without standard, documented procedures for all records related operations. These procedures are based on practices established by the public records officer.

Staffing

Staff must be carefully chosen for natural aptitude and adaptibility to work effectively in records management. Each must have an accurate, up-to-date job description.

Training

Staff must be adequately trained, both in records management theory and in local practices.

Special Records Categories

Provision for the special categories of records enumerated in the Records Management Policy for Government of Alberta Records is the responsibility of the public records officer.

Disaster Planning

The public records officer is expected to ensure that essential records are identified, and to put together a plan for their protection in cooperation with the emergency planning officer.

Central Agency Liaison

The departmental public records officer is the primary contact for the Records Management Branch, the Provincial Archives and the Public Records Committee.

Evaluation

The only way to obtain a realistic picture of a program's effectiveness is to examine the operation of its components at regular intervals.

2. CREATION AND DISTRIBUTION OF INFORMATION

Mail

Internal mail and messenger services should be controlled through a central departmental mailroom. Normally, this would be organized into separate procedures for incoming, outgoing and messenger pickups and deliveries.

The handling of incoming mail consists of receiving, sorting, opening, routing and distribution. Mail should be sorted into the following categories:

registered
personal or confidential (direct delivery)
regular processing

The opening of mail must be attended by two persons in order that monies and other negotiable valuables are protected and recorded according to Government financial policy.

Incoming mail should be time-stamped only if the time of receipt has legal significance, as in the case of tenders and contracts.

The handling of outgoing mail consists of preparing, sorting and controlling material for dispatch outside the department. For considerable savings in envelopes, preparation time and postage, departments should utilize a bulk envelope system, whereby all mail for a common destination is packaged together.

Internal mail clerks move mail within the department, to and from the central mailroom. Mail on route should be protected in the same manner as when it is being handled in the mailroom. Where economical, mail may be delivered by automated devices.

Mail deliveries should be carried out according to an approved schedule, and with a frequency based on the operating requirements of the department. An adequate schedule will reduce the frequency of special demands, such as hand deliveries.

Delivery routes should be as direct as possible. Call stations (pickup points) should be clearly designated and should service more than one office where feasible. Mail going from one call station to another should be sorted and delivered on route, as well as the preliminary sort for internal and outgoing. At the same time, signatures should be obtained for registered and other verifiable deliveries.

Forms

Forms are the principal carriers of government information, constituting about 75% of all paperwork below the executive level. Ideally, analysis, design and procurement should be the responsibility of the public records officer. Well designed, centrally controlled forms should be the objective.

There are two costs associated with forms: printing and clerical processing. Of the two, processing is by far the greatest; the salary cost of processing forms greatly exceeds the equipment, space and salary savings achievable through records disposition. Therefore, setting up systems to curtail these costs should be a priority with all users and the public records officer.

Directives

Directives are downward communications from management. They usually consist of policies and procedures, and may also be rules, guidelines and instructions which are complete in content, of uniform format and classified under a system. They may be temporary or permanent.

A directive control program eliminates repetitive instruction and judgement in routine matters, establishes accountability and standardizes work procedures. The first steps in starting a program would be to conduct an inventory of existing directives, group them by subject, separate the current from the obsolete, revise, delete and incorporate the current directives into the program. Support of top management is essential.

Correspondence

A typical correspondence control policy would consist of guidelines for general, public and executive level correspondence. Topics covered would include designated levels for direct response, turnaround time, letter and memo format, file numbers, copy stamping, circulation, the use of Quick Memos, etc. They may also include, at the executive level, logging in (recording) procedure, BF procedure and the use of signature machines.

Reports

A report is usually the final goal of any information processing system; it summarizes data and provides feedback upon which policies and decisions are based. A report is an operational tool, and in order to be useful it must be clear, complete and current.

Reports are generally the most expensive type of record created; therefore, the cost of production must equal the value received. A management supported reports control program ensures that distribution is restricted to need. A reports control program would consist of annual summaries followed by user questionnaires for updating distribution, and a control system similar to that used for directives.

The final control over the proliferation of incoming reports lies with the receiving agency. A possible control measure might be the compilation of a reports catalogue.

3. RETRIEVAL AND MAINTENANCE

Filing

Filing procedures are those which relate to the retrieval and putting away of records. For best results, filing must be done on a regular basis (at least daily), files should be logically arranged, clearly labelled and easily located.

Classification

The file classification structure is a logical arrangement of subjects reflecting all the functions of the department. Accurate classification and filing practices are vital to efficient retrieval. Before records can be classified, it is necessary to create and maintain a comprehensive file classification plan along with supporting indexes.

The Block Numeric system is the standard system used by the Government of Alberta. Each department's system should be consistent and managed centrally in order to maintain overall uniformity. A filing system should be easy to use and maintain, flexible, and most important, it should make sense. The system should cover all the records in the department, including those in non-traditional format, such as maps and photos. The two main categories of records should be clearly segregated: Administrative and Operational.

Each subject heading should provide for

- policy files
- general subject files
- specific subject files
- case files

Classification is the process of determining the significant retrieval key for each document. It is usually a combination of primary and secondary subject, and may include a code. The classifier first analyzes the document, then determines the primary subject by consulting the index, verifies the choice against the classification manual descriptor, selects the proper number, makes cross-reference notations, if necessary, and creates any new files required. As part of the process, certain records will be routed for user action.

Standard classification procedures should include a spot-check system for monitoring the accuracy of the classification process.

Indexing

The subject file classification system must be supported by both a numeric and an alphabetic index. Indexes are lists or unitized formats identifying and describing the files in the system and their location. They incorporate keywords or topics which correlate with the groupings listed in the classification systems.

The numeric index is a listing arranged in numerical sequence showing the numbers and titles of all files. It generally corresponds to the subject classification structure. The alphabetic index lists the file titles along with their file numbers. It should also contain keyword and cross-reference entries to related file subjects. Indexes can be maintained either in manuals (binders), on cards, on linedex panels or by some automated means.

File Control

Control over the issuance of records is very important. A charge-out system should be in place to ensure that files can be located at all times. There should be a recall system for long term charge-outs and a bring forward (BF) system for prescheduled charge-outs. When the responsibility for a file changes from one person to another, the system should provide for the transfer.

Security

It is the responsibility of the public records officer and the users to protect sensitive records from unauthorized access. The PRO should provide direction on the handling of these records.

4. STORAGE

Active Records

The most important factor to consider in storage is cost; the cost of shelving, cabinets and accessories. Office space is more expensive than warehouse space. By keeping only active records in the office, storage space can be kept to a minimum.

Records used frequently are considered active, and are generally less than two years old. Active records must be protected from deterioration, loss, unauthorized access, removal and destruction.

Inactive Records

When reference to records is neither frequent nor urgent enough to warrant their maintenance in the immediate office space, they are called inactive. Most of this material will be more than two years old. Inactive records should be stored at the Records Management Branch, where protection is assured and storage is more economical. The records remain the property of the depositing department until final disposal.

Off-Site Storage

Computer tapes, electronic data and microfilm are stored off-site at the Records Management Branch facilities as security backup copies. In addition, through a cooperative effort between the public records officer and the departmental emergency planning officer, essential records must be identified and protected at secure sites administered by the Records Management Branch. These records must be faithfully updated or they will be worthless for re-establishing operations.

All records are not equally important to the daily functioning of Government operations. Some are immediately disposable, others may be useful, and still others are very important. These last are the records without which the operation could not carry on; they are the department's essential records. The most essential are those concerning survival operations in the event of a disaster, along with those necessary for the re-establishment of the organizational pattern and basic functions, and those related to the rights of individuals and corporate bodies.

5. SCHEDULING AND DISPOSITION

Scheduling

All records, unless they have historic value, are eventually destroyed. Their predetermined lifespan is dependent upon their nature and the projected period of usefulness. Their actual value is assessed during the scheduling process, along with their period of retention and final disposition.

Administrative records are scheduled in accordance with the Administrative Records Disposition Authority (ARDA), but operational records are unique to each department and must be evaluated and scheduled in each department.

A records schedule should list all the primary subjects and indicate the period of time each must be retained as active in the department and inactive at the Records Management Branch, Public Works, Supply and Services. The schedule should also indicate any access restrictions and the disposal action required for each subject or item upon expiry. Completed schedules must be forwarded to the Public Records Committee for review and approval.

The department should review its schedules every five years to allow for new subjects and changes. These, too, must be approved by the Public Records Committee.

Disposal

No record may be destroyed or transferred from the custody of the department without the approval of the Public Records Committee, either in the form of single request approvals or by permission to use the ARDA for administrative records. Those already approved for disposal should be dispatched promptly and systematically to the Records Management Branch or to the Provincial Archives.

CHAPTER THREE: THE AUDIT

The following questions are the basis upon which the Records Management Branch will audit each department's records management program. A representative of the Branch will conduct the audit with the public records officer, his or her staff and the system with which they work.

The audit may be conducted and reported in conjunction with that of the Auditor General. A copy of the report prepared by the Records Management Branch will be forwarded to the public records officer and his superior officer, and will be followed by a period of three months in which they may reply. A copy may be forwarded by the PRC Committee to the department's deputy minister, if necessary.

Departments will find it advantageous to conduct a self-evaluation of their systems before such an audit takes place. The audit questions are designed and grouped so that the answers will provide a fairly accurate picture of the system's strengths and weaknesses.

Component 1: Program Management

Authority

1. Is there a department-wide policy on records and information management?

2. Is the records management program recognized as a legitimate part of division or branch administration?

3. Is the records management program limited only to the organizational component to which the PRO belongs?

4. To what percentage are the records management program practices and procedures used within the department?

Note: A copy of the organization chart should be obtained.

Selection of Equipment

1. Is the type of equipment used adequate for the application? (A survey of equipment and supplies will be done)

2. Are all major purchases of this equipment in the department reviewed and controlled by the PRO?

3. When users independently procure major records management equipment, is the PRO consulted as to the suitability of the equipment?

Design of System

1. Is there a department-wide classification system for administrative records?

2. Is there a department-wide classification system for operational records?

3. Is the block numeric system being used in both of the above?

4. Is there a file classification plan at the divisional or branch level? (A random check of the file classification plan and records will be made to establish adherence to the block numeric system)

Establishment of Standards

1. Have departmental practices and procedures for records and information management been developed for all areas?

2. Are they based on central agency (RMB, PAA, PRC) standards?

Implementation of Procedures

1. Does the department have documented procedures for records management?

2. Are these practices in keeping with central agency recommendations?

3. Do key personnel in the department acknowledge and use recommended procedures?

Staffing

1. Is there an accurate job description for each records management position? (A comprehensive organization chart will be required indicating direct reporting relationships in the records management program as well as indirect reporting relationships in related functions. These should indicate the level, number of staff and percentage of time spent on the records management functions.)

2. Are the records management duties recognized in the job descriptions of non-records management staff?

3. Do the job descriptions accurately reflect records management functions as they are described in the records management policy?

Training

1. What percentage of the records management staff have completed basic records management training? (All information regarding RM training should be entered on the organization chart.)

2. What percentage of non-records management staff who perform these functions have received basic records management training?

3. Does the department have an internal records management training program?

4. Does the internal training program extend, rather than duplicate, the basic training provided by the Records Management Branch?

Special Records Categories

1. Are the minister's departmental records segregated from his private papers?

2. Are the minister's departmental records included in the subject file classification system?

3. Are the minister's private papers transferred to the Provincial Archives when he or she leaves the portfolio?

4. Are the records of task forces and working groups managed in accordance with the policy?

5. Are the records of defunct departments and operations being transferred to the control of the Provincial Archives, except where another Government department assumes responsibility for the operation?

6. Does the agreement to transfer to the private sector (with the approval of the Public Records Committee) specify which of the records are to remain in the custody of the Government?

7. Do the contracts or terms of conditions with private contractors specify which records are to be submitted to the Government and that they are to be managed in accordance with the policy?

8. Are terminated employee records transferred to the Records Management Branch, Public Works, Supply and Services?

9. Are the master copies of departmental publications scheduled?

10. Is a copy of each publication being forwarded to the Provincial Archives?

Disaster Planning

1. Has the public records officer, in consultation with the emergency planning officer, identified the essential records?

2. Has a disaster plan for records been completed, or at least begun?

3. Has the estimated value of essential records been determined?

4. Has the plan been distributed to all parties concerned?

Central Agency Liaison

1. Is the Records Management Branch or Provincial Archives consulted for interpretation of records management policy and procedures?

2. Are records management publications consulted for guidance in day-to-day functioning?

3. Are Records Management Branch training courses taken advantage of?

4. What percentage of records stored at the Alberta Records Centre are

   active
   inactive
   backup/security

5. When records are disposed of, is it always done through Alberta Records Centre (Records Management Branch) facilities?

6. Are archival interests protected by diligent segregation of such records from those destined to be disposed of?

7. Is an annual report on departmental records holdings submitted annually to the Records Management Branch?

Evaluation

1. Is the records system evaluated at least once every five years?

2. Are statistics kept on the following activities?

    a. file room
    b. transfers
    c. disposal
    d. scheduling
    e. other

3. Are these statistics recorded on some type of form?

4. Have performance standards been established for these activities (hours X volume)?

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS for Component 1:

Component 2: Creation/Distribution

Mail

1. Is all incoming mail routed through a central point?

2. Is incoming mail opened and delivered through a central area?

3. Are all negotiables received in accordance with the Government financial policy?

4. Are signatures obtained for registered and other verifiable mail on delivery?

5. Is outgoing mail collected and delivered to a central point?

6. Is the bulk envelope system used for mail going to the same destination?

7. Is internal mail distributed on an approved schedule basis, and adequate to user needs?

8. How does the number of special deliveries per week compare to the number of regular mail deliveries?

Forms

1. Is forms analysis and design centrally controlled?

2. Is forms procurement centrally controlled?

3. Has a forms inventory been done for the department?

Directives

1. Is there a directives management program within the department?

2. Do all personnel receive or have access to directives?

3. Are the directives current at all times?

4. Are directives classified in such a way that each page and each directive bears a unique identification?

5. Is there a prescribed method for identifying changes and revisions to existing directives?

Correspondence

1. Is there a correspondence management directive outlining format, turn around time, level of signature, circulation, quick memos, etc.?

2. Is there a correspondence control system in place for executive level correspondence?

Reports

1. Is there a reports management system in place?

2. Is there a predetermined distribution system for internally generated reports?

3. Is there a standard format for internally prepared reports?

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS for Component 2:

Component 3: Retrieval/Maintenance

Filing

1. Are records management practices adhered to in the preparation of loose papers and files being put away?

2. Is obvious non-record material purged from the files?

3. What is the percentage of misfiled papers and files in a random sample test?

Classification

1. Does the classification process include analyzing and determining the subject content of documents, using the descriptions in the File Classification manual?

2. Are incoming documents classified before delivery to action offices?

3. Does the file classification system permit easy withdrawal of long term retention and policy records from other records?

4. Is it simple, easy to use and flexible?

5. Does it provide for policy, general, specific and case files for each primary, if necessary?

6. Are file titles descriptive and meaningful?

Indexing

1. Are there indexes supporting the subject file system (numeric and alphabetic) classification?

2. Does the alphabetic index contain keyword and cross-reference entries to related file subjects?

3. Are the indexes maintained on a current basis, with new files added and disposed of files deleted?

4. Are users notified promptly of new or cancelled files?

File Control

1. Is there any form of quality control (periodic review) to ensure the integrity of files?

2. Is there a charge-out system to monitor the location of files?

3. Is there a recall system for updating files that are overdue for return?

4. Is there a bring forward (BF) system for users?

5. Is there some method of notifying the records office when files are transferred from one user to another?

6. Are users getting the records they need, promptly (this may require a user survey)?

7. Are general files reviewed in order to create new subject files as required?

8. Is there a prescribed loan period for charged out files and papers?

9. Is there a follow-up of records on overdue loan?

10. Are file control practices adhered to when putting away, bringing forward, charging out, passing files, recalling files, etc.?

11. Are file room operations carried out on a daily basis to eliminate backlog situations?

12. Are the following file room activities performed in accordance with records management practices and procedures?

    use of enclosures
    creation of files
    closing volumes and files
    chronological order of material
    transfer to inactive
    physical appearance of the records area

Security

1. Are the records afforded the appropriate level of security required under legislation and departmental policy?

2. Are sensitive records protected from unauthorized access, disclosure, alteration, removal and destruction?

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS for Component 3:

Component 4: Storage

Active Records

1. Is there a volume inventory of departmental records holdings?

2. What percentage of the records holdings in the department are active?

3. What percentage of the active records holdings are

   administrative: subject_____, case_____
   operational: subject_____, case_____

4. What is the percentage of active records maintained and managed under the control of the public records officer or his staff?

Inactive Records

1. Are inactive records stored in the active space?

2. Is there an interim storage area for inactive records?

3. What percentage of the records holdings in the department are inactive?

Offsite Storage

1. Are backup/security records stored offsite?

2. Are these records updated regularly?

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS for Component 4:

Component 5: Scheduling and Disposal

Scheduling

1. What percentage of the program areas' records are scheduled?

2. Does this department have permission to use ARDA or are there adequate Authorities to cover all administrative records?

3. What percentage of the machine-readable records are covered by a schedule?

4. How frequently are existing records schedules reviewed?

5. Is there a master set of disposition authorities retained permanently on file?

6. Are schedules prepared on the basis of the whole program?

Disposal

1. Are the approved Authorities applied on an ongoing basis according to recommended records management procedures?

2. Are records for transfer and disposal moved to ARC and PAA according to recommended practices and procedures?

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS for Component 5: